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Tourism Companies and Animal Welfare

By Peter Jones* & Daphne Comfort[±]

Animals play an important role in a wide range of tourism activities, and animal welfare is an increasingly important issue within the tourist industry. While there is a growing volume of research on animal welfare within tourism, little work has been published in the academic literature on how tourism companies address animal welfare. This exploratory paper looks to add to, and extend, that literature by providing a review of how seven tourism companies have publicly addressed animal welfare. The paper reveals that four themes: corporate commitment to animal welfare; policies on specific animals and on experiences and contacts with animals; the role of various stakeholders in the value chain in addressing animal welfare; and monitoring and audit processes, illustrated the companies approach to animal welfare. The authors also raise a number of wider issues and offers some suggestions for future research agendas.

Keywords: animal welfare, animal welfare statements, tourism companies, stakeholders, auditing

Introduction

The screenshot of a western woman riding a horse at speed through a desert landscape is arguably the most striking features of an advertisement for tourism in Saudi Arabia which was shown on commercial television in the UK in 2021 (iSpot.tv. 2021). As such, the advertisement offered an exciting illustration of the role animals can play in a wide variety of tourism experiences. Fennel (2015a), for example, claimed ‘animals are used in so many different capacities to facilitate the needs of tourists and the tourism industry. One would be hard pressed to find a destination where animals were not used in some capacity for tourism purposes.’ On the one hand, animals may be part of such experiences, as for example, where animals feature in local festivals and street entertainment, or where tourists are offered opportunities to visit zoos, bird sanctuaries and prized animal habitats, or to spend time swimming with dolphins, or whale watching. On the other hand, animals may be the *raison d’être* of a tourism experience, as for example, in wildlife and big game safaris, horse riding treks and tours of animal rescue centres. Looking across the tourism industry the Association of Travel Agents (which was formerly known as the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) for example, claimed ‘in many tourism destinations around the world, opportunities to view or interact with animals are commonly offered and are very popular with many holidaymakers’ (ABTA 2021). At the same time, ABTA (2021) also argued that ‘these experiences can be enjoyable, educational and support conservation’, but ‘where experiences are not carefully managed, they can jeopardise animal welfare and your holiday experience.’ More specifically, Meyer et al. (2021) recognised that ‘wildlife tourism is growing in popularity, diversity of target species, and type of tours’, but argued ‘this presents difficulties for management policy that must balance the complex trade-offs between conservation, animal welfare, and pragmatic concerns for tourist satisfaction and economic value.’

Animal welfare is a complex and multi-faceted issue, but recent decades have witnessed growing concerns about animal welfare across many societies. As public awareness of, and concerns for, animal welfare have grown, so it has become an increasingly important issue for tourism companies which look to either include, or to centre, animal experiences into their tourism offers. On the academic side, Carr and Broom (2018) claimed that ‘the discussion of animal welfare in tourism may still be in its infancy, but over the last decade the issue has come to draw the attention of a growing number of scholars.’ While Font et al. (2019) looked to analyse if, and how, travel trade associations, had the developed and implemented animal welfare standards, little work has been published within the academic literature on how major companies within the tourism industry address animal welfare. Here published work tends to have focused on individual companies, often specialising in specific human-animal interactions (e.g., Duffy and Moore 2011, Pastrana et al. 2020). This exploratory paper looks to add to, and extend, that literature by providing a review of how a number of companies within the tourism industry have publicly addressed animal welfare. The paper includes a brief outline of the characteristics of animal welfare, a short literature review of animal welfare in the tourism industry, the method of enquiry and frame of reference employed in the paper, a review of the animal welfare statements and policies published by seven tourism companies, namely Bookings Holdings, Expedia, TUI, Flight Centre Travel Group., Trip Advisor, Intrepid Travel and G Adventures, and some concluding reflections on animal welfare in the tourism industry.

Animal Welfare

For the American Veterinary Medical Association (2010) an animal is seen to be in ‘a good state of welfare if (as indicated

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by scientific evidence) it is healthy, comfortable, well-nourished, safe, able to express innate behaviour, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress', and 'ensuring animal welfare is a human responsibility.' More popularly, commitments to animal welfare are often characterised by the 'Five Freedoms' framework, initially drawn up by the UK's Farm Animal Welfare Council (2009), and also commonly described in the tourism industry as the Five Domains Model. These five freedoms or domains are freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, injury or disease; freedom to express normal behaviour; and freedom from fear and distress. At the same time, animal welfare is a complex issue within tourism, not least in that it poses different challenges for different animals and environments.

In addressing management responsibilities, ABTA (2013) argued that 'reasonable animal welfare requires disease prevention and veterinary treatment, appropriate shelter, management, nutrition, humane handling and humane slaughter/euthanasia' and that 'suppliers, animal owners and keepers have a responsibility to the animals for which they are responsible on a permanent or temporary basis. This includes the provision of their health and welfare needs.' The pressure group Tourism Concern (2017), recognised the 'increasing awareness of animal welfare issues', but argued that 'many tourists are unaware of how their daily decisions impact both animals and local residents in tourist destinations.' At the same time, as animals are removed, in one way or another, from their natural, to a captive, environment, to provide tourism experiences, so this can cause welfare problems. ABTA (2013) for example, emphasised that 'in captivity animals potentially face a number of challenges for which evolution has not prepared them; the geographical location, climate, enclosures and vegetation may be alien to the species as it exists in the wild. Similarly, some of the survival challenges an animal confronts in the wild may be absent in captivity (hunting, foraging, territorial defence and social dominance).'

Literature Review

Relatively little work has been published within the academic literature on how companies within the tourism industry address animal welfare, and this review simply looks to highlight the content of the limited number of papers in this field. Some of this work looks to take a general view across the tourist sector. Winter (2020), for example, offered a review of published research on animal ethics and welfare in the tourism industry and suggested that millions of tourists 'participate in the "animal gaze", and increasingly, they are demanding more intense experiences' that can have 'serious welfare impacts on the animals.' von Essen et al. (2020) claimed that the emergence of new modes of animal tourism, that trade on increasingly embodied close encounters with animals, including sloth selfies, visiting cat cafes, swimming with sharks and agro-tourism petting zoos, has put animal welfare standards at risk. Here, Von Essen et al. (2020) identified a number of animal welfare challenges and concluded that 'animals become laborers in a global capitalist economy when they are scripted into the service of the tourism industry.'

In addressing 'Tourism and Animal Welfare', Fennell (2015b) drew attention to the lack of a comprehensive treatment of animal welfare and tourism in the literature and emphasised that linking tourism and animal ethics was 'deemed essential', not least in that animal welfare 'contributes to the viability of tourism operations.' More specifically, Fennell (2015b) focussed on zoos and sled dog tourism to illustrate a number of animal welfare challenges facing tourism and concluded with a call 'to initiate programmes of research for the purpose of taking more seriously the welfare needs of animals used in tourism.' Under the title 'Tourism and Animal Welfare', Carr and Broom (2018) edited a review of animal welfare, which included individually authored case studies of Wild Bottlenose Dolphins in Australia, shark welfare, public aquaria and zoos, and mapped out a potential path for the future welfare of animals in tourism and a linked research agenda.

In an attempt to explore approaches to animal welfare at an international level Font et al. (2019) surveyed if, and how, 62 national and international trade associations had established and implemented animal welfare standards. However, this work revealed that only six trade associations referred to animal welfare, that only three had well developed animal welfare activities, and that only one monitored its members' animal welfare standards. In conclusion Font et al. (2019) argued that trade associations have 'both the technical capacity and the moral responsibility' to develop industry consensus and raise industry standards in relation to animal welfare but suggested that acceptance of responsibility towards animal welfare was rare.

A number of studies have explored animal welfare in the context of particular species or environments, and the aim here is to offer a few examples to illustrate the range and focus of such work rather than to provide a comprehensive review. Duffy and Moore (2011), for example, used a political economy approach to examine some of the animal welfare issues associated with the development of elephant trekking in Botswana and Thailand. Here a central issue was seen to revolve around definitions of acceptable and appropriate standards for working animals and Duffy and Moore (2011) concluded that 'attempts at global regulation need to seriously engage with local level practices if global standards are to be workable and acceptable for tour operators, animal welfare NGOs, elephant camp owners and tourists alike.'

Moorhouse et al. (2016) suggested that the majority of wildlife tourist attractions had substantial negative animal welfare impacts, and that in the absence of global regulatory authority, tourist revenue has become the ultimate arbiter of what

constitutes acceptable use of animals. However, Moorhouse et al. (2016) argued that tourists cannot assess animal welfare adequately and they suggested that the way forward was to empower tourists by presenting them with authoritative independent assessments of wildlife tourist attractions' impacts in an accessible format, when tourists are making their travel choices and plans. In a study conducted in Koombana Bay off Western Australia, Senigaglia et al. (2020) revealed that the practice of managed dolphin feeding designed to promote spatially and temporarily reliable encounters with tourists, was detrimental to long term dolphin welfare.

On the conceptual side, some researchers have looked to incorporate a range of theoretical approaches into their work on animal welfare within tourism, but this is not always a major feature of such work. Font et al. (2019), for example, drew on institutional theory in that it acknowledges the ways in which organisations respond to stakeholder demands depends on the institutions they operate within, and it allows animal welfare to be seen as both a scientific and a moral question, while also limiting ambiguity and reducing co-opting. Fennell and Shepard (2020) argued that ethical theory offered considerable promise in helping tourist agents to understand and evaluate justice for animals used frequently in tourism. More critically, Chang (2019) has argued that critical tourism studies can deconstruct mainstream concepts and theorisations and give voice to the marginalised within the tourism industry. At the same time, the focus of the current paper is on how tourism companies are addressing animal welfare. As such stakeholder theory (e.g., Gavare and Johansson 2010), which posits that companies should look to create value for all its stakeholders, including shareholders, suppliers, employees, society at large, animals and the environment, may help to shed some light on corporate approaches to animal welfare.

This literature review of animal welfare in the tourism industry suggests that the field is currently fragmented, and at a best, embryonic. While the review provides a sense of academic context, and some basic reference points for the paper, it does suggest that the tourist industry's approach to animal welfare is not yet a distinct field of research, not least in that it lacks an agreed framework, a substantial body of empirical research, and a robust theoretical foundation. However, the paucity of published research on how major tourism companies have addressed animal welfare, suggests a gap in the tourism literature that merits attention.

Methodology

In looking to undertake an exploratory review of how companies within the tourism industry had approached animal welfare, the authors chose a simple method of enquiry, which they believe to be fit for purpose. A preliminary Internet survey, conducted in February 2021, of tourism companies revealed that the animal welfare statements and policies of seven tourism companies, namely, Booking Holdings, Expedia, TUI, Flight Centre Travel Group, Trip Advisor, Intrepid Travel and G Adventures, were readily accessible. As such this was an opportunist sampling approach, but the seven companies reflect the scale and variety of the tourist industry, and the information on animal welfare they posted on the Internet provides the empirical material for this paper. In what is still an embryonic research area field, the authors believe this is an appropriate approach, which provides an exploratory review of how some of the leading companies within the tourism industry were addressing animal welfare.

This companies' animal welfare statements and policies are in the public domain on the selected tourism companies' websites and the authors took the view that they did not need to seek permission to use it. A number of authors (e.g., de Grosbois 2016) have used forms of content analysis to systematically identify themes and issues on corporate websites. However, given the exploratory nature of the paper and that the animal welfare statements and policies posted on the selected companies' websites were clearly structured, the authors were minded that content analysis was not appropriate for their review. Rather, the authors undertook a close reading of the relevant document to draw out the important issues and themes.

The review draws on quotations drawn from the selected tourism companies' websites. The aim here, is to explore how the companies publicly expressed, and provided illustrative details on their approaches to animal welfare, and the authors took the view that this was perhaps best captured in the companies' own words, not least in that quotations could convey corporate authenticity, and offer greater depth of understanding (Corden and Sainsbury 2006). At the same time, the authors satisfied themselves that the two conditions outlined by Saunders et al. (2009), relating to the reliability of information drawn from Internet sources, namely the authority and reputation of the source and the citation of a contact on the website, were met.

Booking Holdings is the world's largest online travel company, and it owns and operates several travel fare aggregators and travel fare research engines, including Booking.co, Priceline.com, Cheapflights, and Rentalcar.com. Expedia is a US based online travel company, it has over 200 websites in some 70 countries, and operates a number of brands including ebookers, CheapTickets, Trivago, Hotels. Com and Expedia Cruises. TUI is an Anglo-German multinational travel and tourism company, and it owns travel agencies, hotels, airlines and cruise ships. Flight Centre Travel Group is an Australian travel agency, and its brands include FCM Travel Solutions, Liberty and Escape Travel. Tripadvisor is a US based online travel company and it enables customers to compare prices on hotels, flights and cruises and to book holidays and tours. Intrepid Travel, based in Australia, is the world's largest small group adventure travel company, and it offers over 1,000 adventures in some 100 countries. G Adventures is a Canadian based operator of small group tours and its tours include

destinations in Asia, Africa, South America, and to Polar regions.

Results

The animal welfare statements and policies posted by the selected tourism companies effectively captured their approach to animal welfare. However rather than reviewing their individual approaches, the aim here is to identify, and draw, out a number of general themes that illustrate the companies' approaches to animal welfare. More specifically, the authors' reading of the selected tourism companies' animal welfare policies and statements enabled them to identify four general, though not universal, themes, namely, a corporate commitment to animal welfare; policies on specific animals and on experiences and contacts with animals; the role of various stakeholders in the value chain in addressing animal welfare; and monitoring and audit processes.

Strategic corporate commitment was expressed in a variety of ways. Expedia (2015), for example, reported 'we help people to go places and help them to do so with respect for the people, animals, and natural environments of our planet', and claimed 'when done responsibly and thoughtfully, activities involving animals can instil a deeper connection with the natural world, promote conservation, enhance the human experience, and drive interest in the treatment and survival of all animals.' Booking Holdings (2021) asserted its mission 'to empower people to experience the world', and its belief that this mission should be fulfilled 'with respect, humility and awareness for the world's people, animals, communities and the environment.' G Adventures (2020) emphasised 'our vision is for a world where tourism benefits both animals and people', and that 'we care about animals and we work with organisations that share our vision and are working to make it a reality.' Flight Centre Travel Group (2021) claimed 'the welfare of animals is very important to us', and 'we believe all animals should live in a reasonable state of welfare and are committed to doing our part to make this a reality.'

A number of the selected companies looked to enshrine their approach to animal welfare within the Five Freedoms/Five Domains Model outlined above. Intrepid Travel (2021), for example, suggested that 'travel is an opportunity to experience different cultures, meet new people, taste weird and wonderful foods and - for many - get close to wildlife' and claimed its animal welfare guidelines were framed around the Five Domains Model. Here the company's focus was on 'animal welfare basics', defined as nutrition, environment, health, behaviour and mental state. Nutrition, for example, was seen to include factors that involve an animal's access to sufficient, balanced varied and clean food and water, while health relates to factors enabling good health through absence of disease, injury, impairment and good fitness levels. In a similar vein, Booking Holdings (2021) claimed 'we take our lead on animal welfare from the Five Freedoms for the basic needs of animals under human care.'

Secondly, the selected companies provided details of their policies on specific animals and on experiences and contacts with these animals. Elephant rides are not included in any of Intrepid Travel's itineraries, for example, not least because the company believes that preparing captive elephants to take part in such activity involves cruel, painful and intense training that forces the elephants to accept human control and that the hooks used to restrain the animals while they are being ridden can cause serious injuries. More generally, Booking Holdings emphasised that it does not promote animal performances, shows or circuses, which involves dolphins, elephants, bears, lions, tigers, cheetahs, leopards, orangutans and sloths, wild animal rides, facilities such as crocodile, turtle or snake farms, where animals are purposely bred to produce commercial products, and venues where visitors can buy products sourced from wild animals. Tripadvisor (2021) claimed the company 'will not sell tickets or generate booking revenue for specific experiences where tourists come into physical contact with captive wild animals unless certain exceptional circumstances apply.' These circumstances include aquarium touch pools and invertebrate touch and feel experiences, used under supervision for educational purposes, feeding programmes in a captive environment and where the animals have not been drugged or intimidated into compliance, and volunteering to protect endangered species at zoos, aquariums and sanctuaries.

Expedia (2015) published guidelines on zoos and aquariums, physical contact with animals, animal rides, animal performances, animals in sport, venues hosting wild animals, and wild animals in natural or semi natural habitats. In addressing physical contact with animals, Expedia (2015) reported 'intentional contact will not be permitted with wild and exotic animals', including elephants, lions, tigers, bears, alligators and snakes, but 'petting zoos, falconry demonstrations and educational and therapeutic interactions with a variety of species under strict supervision adhering to the Expedia Group animal welfare and guest welfare principles, are permitted.' Expedia (2015) also outlined its position on 'animal performances', namely that the company 'will not support experiences where wild animals are required to perform in a demeaning, unnatural manner for entertainment purposes', while 'snake charming, roadside animal displays magic/ cabaret shows that utilize wild animals as part of the act' are also prohibited.

Some companies look to provide guidance to tour leaders on animal interactions. In providing guidance on 'Riding & Using Animals for Transport', Intrepid Travel (2021), for example, asserted its belief that 'domesticated working animals, such as horses, donkeys/mules and camels which are used for transportation on tours should have a decent life, where they are properly cared for and the positive aspects of their existence outweigh the negative.' Further, in addressing 'Riding Camels

and Donkey Mules', Intrepid Travel (2021) claimed these animals were only offered in itineraries where 'the wellbeing of animals has been previously established', but the company also advised tour leaders to check on specific operators. Here tour leaders were encouraged to check, for example, that animals carried no more than approximately half their own body weight, and less during extreme heat or on steep inclines, and that the animals should not be fed by the tourists. More specifically, in checking on camels, tour leaders are advised to consider if the camels coats were in good condition and they are free from sores around the mouth, shoulders, spine and stomach, and that handlers did not use physical force to control or manoeuvre the animals.

Thirdly, some of the selected tourism companies recognised the role some of the stakeholders in the tourism value chain played in addressing animal welfare. On the one hand, some companies stressed that they effectively relied on the integrity of their suppliers to ensure animal welfare standards. Expedia (2015) for example, reported that the company 'requires all its supply partners to represent and warrant that their products are, and will remain compliant with this Animal Welfare Policy' and that it 'will notify a supplier if it believes that all or part of its products violate this Animal Welfare Policy.' Further Expedia (2015) asserted 'if, at Expedia's sole discretion, the supplier fails to make changes for its products to comply with the Animal Welfare Policy, Expedia may remove all, or part, of the supplier's products from Expedia sites.'

In focusing on 'whale and dolphin seaside sanctuaries', Tripadvisor (2021), emphasised that 'seaside sanctuaries must adhere to a strict nobreeding policy, must not train their animals to perform in any shows or performances for public display, and must prohibit all forms of physical interaction between guests and the animals, including any in-water guest experiences.' Some tourist companies recognised that their employees have a role to play in protecting animal welfare. TUI (2021), for example, reported 'we train our colleagues in destination on animal welfare in excursions.'

Flight Centre Travel Group (2021) reported 'we are engaging and will continue to engage with employees across the business to benefit from their front-line experience' and that 'our goal is to use our influence wherever we can to end the practice of cruel animal attractions.'

On the other hand, customers are also seen as important stakeholders in animal welfare. In emphasising that 'excursions involving animals remain very popular with our customers', Tui (2021), for example, reported 'our market research shows that the protection of wild animals is important to the majority of holidaymakers who also believe that animal-related excursions should meet global welfare standards.' Expedia (2015) acknowledged its customers had a role to play in safeguarding animal welfare, and the company recommended ways in which tourists can develop a discerning awareness of the differences between ethical, and problematic, wildlife experiences. Flight Centre Travel Group (2021) claimed 'we do not seek to vilify customers interested in animal attractions, but rather to educate them about potential problems, and where appropriate, to provide them with suitable alternatives.'

Fourthly, there were commitments to monitoring and auditing designed to ensure animal welfare. TUI (2021) for example, claimed 'our rolling programme of audits is the most extensive among tour operators with over 150 independent audits carried out since 2016', and that 'by the end of 2018, 76% of our animal excursion suppliers have been audited on-site by a 3rd party, and more than 50% of the suppliers audited, have made improvements in terms of animal welfare.' Further, TUI (2021) asserted its belief that 'auditing, combined with a close supplier working relationship, enables us to meet customer expectations on animal welfare standards in excursions', and that 'wherever possible we prefer to engage with our suppliers on improvement plans, but we also remove venues from the programme if standards are not met.' Expedia (2015) reported introducing a review-monitoring policy to scour customer reviews for animal welfare concerns.

Reflections

While all the selected tourism companies publicly addressed the issue of animal welfare and looked to provide details of their commitment to it, a number of sets of issues merit reflection and discussion. The companies were arguably at their most emphatic in emphasising their strategic commitment to animal welfare, but tourist companies have a wide geographical and cultural reach and fulfilling their animal welfare commitments presents a number of challenges. While the tourism companies' approach to animal welfare may strike a sympathetic chord with current western attitudes, and with western tourists, in many tourist destinations in less developed countries, local communities may have very different attitudes to animal welfare and may simply see the animals as providing an opportunity to generate an income, with little concern for their wellbeing.

At the same time, the tourism companies' commitments to animal welfare are at least one step removed from their own operations, not least in that companies and operators in their supply chains provide animals and facilities for animal experiences enjoyed by tourists, and this certainly reduces the tourism companies' control over animal welfare management. That said, some, but not all, of the selected tourism companies emphasised that their approach to animal welfare was underwritten by independent monitoring and auditing of their suppliers. However, the companies that did report monitoring and auditing did not publish any data, for example, on key performance indicators or targets, or on the outcomes of the monitoring and auditing processes. Thus, all the selected tourism companies' commitments to animal welfare effectively have to be taken at face value, in that their animal welfare policies do not include evidence from independent assessments of

welfare standards.

At the same time more general concerns have been expressed about the efficacy of the audit process in safeguarding animal welfare.' LeBaron et al. (2017), for example, argued 'the growing adoption of auditing as a governance tool is a puzzling trend, given two decades of evidence that audit programs generally fail to detect or correct labor and environmental problems in global supply chains.' More specifically, in reviewing the role of 'audit in animal welfare', Escobar and Demeritt (2017) highlighted the 'tendency for audit processes to become decoupled from the qualities they are meant to assure.' As such, there is the danger that the audit exercises become a routine reporting end in themselves, rather than a means, to an end.

More generally, tourism companies face strident criticisms of their approach to animal welfare. World Animal Protection (2018), for example suggested that 'a shockingly high number of the world's travel trade associations are lagging in providing animal welfare guidelines to travel companies' and that 'the majority are doing nothing to prevent wildlife cruelty in tourism.' World Animal Protection's (2020) report entitled 'Tackling the Travel Industry', claimed 'throughout the world, wild animals are taken from the wild, or bred in captivity to be used as entertainment in the tourism industry. In most cases they are separated from their mothers at an early age, exposed to harsh training that causes physical and psychological damage. They experience harm, stress and discomfort in their unsuitable living conditions at entertainment venues. They are exploited for commercial gain.' More specifically, the report suggested that tourism companies 'are generally not transparent about their animal welfare commitments targets and that they are not publicly reporting their performance against these targets and that companies are not as explicit as they could be about the standards they set for their suppliers' (World Animal Protection 2020).

Under the banner 'Animal Abuse for Tourism is Happening Now, Right on our Doorstep', Four Paws (2021), a global animal welfare organisation, claimed 'from festivals, to zoos, circuses or for selfies, across Europe animals are suffering for our entertainment.' Further, Four Paws (2021) suggested 'few tourists are aware, however, that these animals have not adapted to be around humans but are usually sedated or psychologically "beaten" down to the point of submission' and that 'they go back to small cages, where they spend the rest of their lives, with no access to proper food, nature or even light.' At a time when social media is becoming an increasingly important force in energising public opinion, it remains to be seen how well tourism companies will be able to assuage public concerns about the animal welfare issues associated with tourism.

At the time of writing, it is impossible to consider animal welfare in the tourism industry without some reference to COVID-19, not least because the travel and tourism sector of the economy has been severely affected by the pandemic. Thams et al. (2020), for example, reported 'major market players in all areas of the touristic value chain, i.e., airlines, tour operators, hotels, cruise lines, and retailers, have either minimized or even completely stopped their production for an undefined period of time.' The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (2020) estimated a 72% decline in international tourist arrivals between January and October 2020, compared to the previous year, and that a return to 2019 levels could take up to four years. In the wake of this dramatic decline in international tourism, and the attendant decline in the demand for animal attractions and experiences, there are fears that many animals will be abandoned and/or mistreated.

Looking to the future, and to the re-emergence of tourism in a return to what at best seems likely to be a new sense of normality, it remains to be seen if the major tourism companies will continue to commit the financial resources required to fulfil their commitments to animal welfare, or if they will concentrate their resources on looking to rebuild their core businesses, with animal welfare becoming a secondary consideration. That said the COVID-19 pandemic may have heightened tourist awareness that animals may harbour diseases that can be transmitted to humans, and this may both reduce tourists' appetite for animal experiences and their concerns about animal welfare. More positively, while World Animal Protection (2020) recognised that 'the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be devastating for the travel industry', the pressure group argued, 'with it comes the opportunity to build back better, as a resilient, responsible and sustainable tourism sector', but a belief that the COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to reimagine and reform tourism without exploiting animals may, simply be a pipe dream.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an exploratory review of how a number of companies within the tourism industry have publicly addressed animal welfare within their animal welfare statements. As such the paper adds to the limited retail literature on animal welfare within the tourism industry. Four themes captured the spirit of the selected companies animal welfare statements, namely a corporate commitment to animal welfare; policies on specific animals and on experiences and contacts with animals; the role of various stakeholders in the value chain in addressing animal welfare; and monitoring and audit processes. The authors argued the selected tourism companies were at their most emphatic in emphasising their strategic commitment to animal welfare, but tourist companies have a wide geographical and cultural reach and fulfilling their animal welfare commitments presents a number of challenges. Further, the authors argued that the selected tourism companies' commitments to animal welfare are at least one step removed from their own operations and they raised concerns about the nature of the auditing processes employed by the tourism companies to underwrite these commitments.

The authors recognise that the paper has its limitations, not least that its empirical material is drawn exclusively from the corporate websites of a small number of tourism companies, and that it does not include any face to face interviews, or focus group sessions, with representatives from those companies or with other stakeholders in the tourism value chain. However, the authors believe that their simple method of enquiry and frame of reference are fit for purpose for an exploratory paper, that it makes a modest contribution to the limited literature on tourism companies and animal welfare, and that it offers a valuable platform for future research.

More specifically, animal welfare offers a variety of potential research agendas for tourism scholars. At a conceptual level, researchers may look to explore how tourism companies have responded to stakeholder demands for improvements in animal welfare within the tourism industry, and to test, refine and develop institutional and stakeholder theories. At the same time, analysis of potential changing stakeholder perceptions of the importance of animal welfare, including changes in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, will also contribute to stakeholder theory. A range of empirical research opportunities can also be identified. At the corporate level, research may help to increase understanding not only of why, and how, tourism companies develop their policies on animal welfare, and how they look to elicit stakeholders' opinions, but also of how they take account of wider pressure group campaigns in formulating such policies. At the consumer level, many research questions arise, including, how animal welfare tourism companies are incorporating animal welfare into their marketing messages, and if consumer awareness of the tourism companies' approach to animal welfare influences tourists' behaviour.

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